

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

Adapted from "Unshackled" Radio Broadcasts

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Chapter Nine

Jimmy the Rat

THE DIRTY-WINDOWED STORE that stood on the corner of South Clark Street in Chicago in the 1920's might have been a laundry. Some people did, in fact, unfold laundry tickets from their pockets as they pushed open the door with the bell that jangled somewhere out of sight. These same people came out of the store with flat bundles wrapped in brown paper.

But there was more than flatwork in the brown bundles and a lot more than a jangling bell out of sight. Below the room with counters where the several Chinese dolls smiled and spelled out the letters on laundry stubs was another room, long, dark and narrow. In this room, beneath two windows, boarded up except for a slim line of light, laundry tubs sagged. A gas jet flickered in the corner.

Flanking the wall across from the tubs was a double row of wooden bunks, and from the bunks, or shelves, an arm dangled or a leg twitched. This was John Lee's opium den.

On a Sunday afternoon in the 20's, two legs seemed more alive than the others, for with a jerk, they flipped over the bunk edge. Their owner sat up and peered down from his shelf, blinking in the darkness. The dank hair, the pasty face belonged to a boy not yet twenty. His head pitched forward as he swayed on the edge of the bunk.

From somewhere outside the room, slippers slapped on the cement floor. The boy leaned back into the darkness as a trim Oriental bustled into the room and appraised the bunks with his customary haughtiness.

From a lower shelf, a girl moaned. The Chinese hurried over to her, taking from her limp hand a pipe into which he tapped opium. Then he lit the pipe and put it back into the girl's hand.

"There you are, my dear." His voice was metallic, out of tone with the misty dimness of the room. "A nice deep draw on your lovely pipe." The girl sighed as she nestled her head into the pillow and breathed deeply, the pipe neglected in her relaxed hand.

The boy on his shelf furtively watched, bubbling through slightly parted lips. The girl breathed evenly, softly. Someone in another bunk snored. The boy slid off his shelf, bobbed a bit as his "rubbery" legs hit the floor, and then crept over to the girl's bunk.

He reached for her out-flung hand and, like a hungry animal, he sucked on the pipe the man had lit.

A laugh began low in the darkness by the laundry tubs and rasped across the room.

"Thought I'd gone," the Oriental said. "Thought you'd steal from paying customers' smokes. You low rat. Jimmy the rat."

The boy pulled away from the pipe, hunched over, shrank back toward his own bunk.

"That's right. Jimmy the rat. That's just what you are. You sleep like a rat on a dirty shelf. Then you creep around in the dark and steal like a rat."

Jimmy stood still. "Why shouldn't I take her pipe? She paid for it. You're not losing. And I pay you for mine, too."

"Yes," John Lee told him. "You do pay for it. And that reminds me. Get busy with the laundry tubs. You've had enough smoke for one day. It's your time to get busy." He came across the room and pushed the boy toward the wash tubs.

Jimmy rounded over the tubs and listened to John Lee's slippers flap up the stairs. The basement room was silent except for some smoker's pleased whimpering, an uneven gasp.

"Hey, Rat!"

Jimmy started back from the tubs.

"Hey, Jimmy the rat! Bad cess (luck) to you, Rat.

Where are you? I cannot see you in all this confounded darkness."

An ugly man perched on the stairs, peered through the banisters at Jimmy.

"Why, Ben Shamus, sir, here I am," Jimmy whispered.

"What do you want, sir?"

"Come here." The ugly head wobbled as if its neck had no bones. "Say, our friend, John Lee, murdered that little Chinese girl last week, didn't he?" Ben Shamus hissed the sentence between his broken teeth.

"Murdered?" Jimmy questioned.

"Yeah, you know that little Rose Ling or Sing or Ming or whatever her name was."

Jimmy sloshed sheets in the water. He pinched his face into a frown. "I don't talk about Mr. Lee," he said.

"Well, I do. I pay as I go here. You can keep still if you've a mind to. You're just a rat, but I'm a paying customer. I talk about him and I know for a fact when his oriental highness' nerves gets all unstrung he takes it out on-"

"On me," Jimmy interrupted.

"And also on the little wooden dolls upstairs. Hires them to hand out the bundles of laundry with dope in them. Then when it strikes his fancy he beats the daylights out of them."

Ben Shamus laughed. A woman on a shelf rolled over and groaned. A moment's quiet, then Ben Shamus laughed again.

"And then he murders them. And if you don't watch out, Rat, he'll kill you."

Jimmy grated a sheet over the scrub board. Ben Shamus stopped talking. Silence settled like dust until - a song leaked through the boarded-up window into the cellar room.

"I-am-so-glad-that-JESUS-loves-me," came the words.

"Whist ye," Ben Shamus said. "The Pacific Garden Mission boys out on the gospel car singing about GOD. Them with their faces clean and their pants pressed and me setting in a dope house like a heathen. It's Sunday afternoon, so help me."

Jimmy stopped kneading the clothes. "Pacific Garden Mission? What's that?"

"A mission, my boy, right around the corner from this dump. A Christian mission, if you can think of it."

The singing was louder now. "I-am-so-glad-that-JESUS-loves-me." Jimmy covered his ears with his soapy hands.

"I-am-so-glad-that-JESUS-loves-me." Jimmy had sung that song himself once. He had learned it in Sunday school and he had been singing it one summer morning as he had swung through his dad's Indiana orchard, hands in his pockets. "Hey, there," he had called across the orchard to Dick, the newest hired hand on the farm.

"You sound happy," Dick had said. "Heard you singing."

"I 'most always sing," Jimmy had answered. "That's my favorite song."

Dick spat on the gravel of the driveway before he said, "Aw, it's corny."

"I don't see how. I like it. It makes me feel good."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not," Jimmy had answered.

The hired hand had chuckled to himself, put his fingers to his jacket pocket for a second. "Hey, kid, come on out to the barn after the milking's done this evening and I'll show you something that'll really make you feel good."

"I don't understand."

"You don't have to," Dick had told him. "Just meet me in the barn."

The pipe that Dick caressed that night in the barn did not look like any other pipe. Jimmy had taken it, looked at it in the light of the hayloft window, and held the bowl in his hands, as Dick talked. "One drag on it, kid, and you'll be in Heaven. Soft lights, women, music, anything you want. It's all in that pipe."

The boy had been puzzled. "But the habit's bad, isn't it?"

"No, kid. You're wrong there. Just a few times won't hurt. There's no habit in it, just rainbows."

Then Jimmy had picked up the pipe.

He had puffed at it and watched the light from the hayloft window whirl into a "rainbow." He had curled in the hay and smiled.

At that summer's end, Dick announced he was leaving. "Dick, you can't leave me. What'll I do? I haven't got any more stuff. Ma and Dad'll find out. Dick, don't leave me!" Jimmy had clung to the man, tugged at his arm.

"So what?" Dick was nonchalant.

"So I'll die, that's what. Leave me a little of it." "How much is it worth to you?"

"I got twenty-nine bucks. I'll give you all I got. You can have it all" Jimmy's hands had torn at his jeans pocket until he drew out his wallet. "Here, now give me that stuff."

The smokes that Dick had left Jimmy didn't satisfy him long. He had run away from the Indiana farm; found John Lee's laundry where he got his opium and his heroin, morphine and cocaine, for scrubbing clothes, lived for three years as if at the bottom of a festering cesspool.

"I-am-so-glad-that-JESUS-loves-me."

Jimmy let the sheets and clothes sink to the bottom of the dirty washwater and went quickly

through the basement room, up past Ben Shamus drowsing on the stairs, over a short, creaky platform to a door.

"Don't open that door," John Lee had said. Soundlessly, Jimmy tugged at it, and the street noises and sunshine rushed in at him. "Do not go outside," John Lee had warned. "You are in bad shape. The police may spot you and then we will all be in serious trouble."

Jimmy leaned against the door and gripped the door knob. The singing was finished, but a woman's voice, high above the clatter on the street, said, "We just sang a song called '*I Am So Glad That JESUS Loves Me.*' And JESUS does love you, anybody."

"And if anyone, within the sound of my voice right now, wants to find release and freedom from misery and loneliness, caused by a life shackled with sin, all you have to do is ask for prayer. I want to pray with you. I'll be waiting for you."

Jimmy stepped stumblingly forward. His hand slid free of the door knob.

He was wrenched around. "Get back in there, Rat," John Lee commanded.

"I wasn't going anywhere. Honest, I was just listening to the lady," Jimmy stuttered.

John Lee yanked him aside, hurtled him across the platform, and slammed shut the outside door. He slapped Jimmy on the mouth. "Rat, try to get outside once more and see what happens."

Jimmy slunk back to his shelf. John Lee hurried upstairs again. When he reached the top, he began to shout. "You, Lotus, you're as stupid as Jimmy the Rat, or any of the rest of them."

"Yes, John Lee."

"Yes, John Lee. Is that all you can say?" A slap stung bare flesh.

"Me serve you good, John Lee?" the high voice asked. "Just as good as the rest, I suppose," his voice lowered.

"Lotus, do you like me?"

"Me-hate-you."

The man's voice spluttered. "You stupid girl. I'd as soon kill you as look at you."

Feet shuffled back and forth across the floor above Jimmy. He went to the bottom of the stairs, jumped back as the door at the top burst open. There was a thump as a body rolled over and over down the stairs. With a thud, little Lotus hit the concrete floor, head down.

Jimmy stood without a move. Then he bent over her.

"Lotus, Lotus," he called to her.

"Me-go-dead, Jimmy," the little Chinese girl said. "No you don't, Lotus," Jimmy held her head. "You can't die. Don't die and I'll get out of here somehow and get you out and we can be good to each other."

Lotus turned her head, tried to turn her painted mouth into a smile, began to gasp.

"Don't die, Lotus," Jimmy repeated. "You're such a kid. We can get out of this hole together."

"Me glad to go dead," Lotus sighed. "Listen to me, Lotus."

For an hour, Jimmy squatted in the dust with the broken body in his arms, rubbing the doll-size hands with his.

Once Ben Shamus lurched over and kicked her. "Don't," Jimmy pushed him away.

"Just wanted to see if she was dead or alive," Ben said. "You needn't bother," Jimmy told him. "She's dead." Even when John Lee flapped down the stairs, Jimmy clung to Lotus. John Lee tore him away from the girl, kicked her into a corner. "All right, Rat," he said. "You know too much."

Like a demon, John Lee raced at Jimmy. The first blow caught the boy in the stomach, the second in the mouth. Blood dripped on the cement floor, and John Lee shrieked and lunged. Suddenly, folded in two, Jimmy slithered to the floor.

"He won't talk now," scoffed John Lee to the two sodden-faced Chinese who pounded down the stairs. "He'll be dead soon. You can toss him on a heap of junk. Far enough away, please, so that the stench doesn't blow back this way."

The two sodden-faced men threw Jimmy on a pile of scrap lumber five alleys away, and his arms and legs flailed out over the boards. There they left him.

Rain dripped on Jimmy's face, washed some of the blood away from his mouth, smeared the rest all the way around to the back of his neck. The street lights came on, shone down on his swollen eyes. Jimmy came to, clutching at a dirty board. He moved one stiffened leg, then the other. He crawled down from the lumber pile, limped down the alley. One badly injured leg dragged painfully.

"It was the Pacific Garden Mission," he muttered to a cat that scampered away from him. His long wet hair hung in his eyes, and above his suit that hung in strips, his face was blotched and bruised.

"I'm going to find that mission." Someone said they would be waiting to pray for him.

Yes, the mission door was open. Down the aisle, Jimmy hobbled. Weakly, he pitifully wavered, "Please, oh please, I want somebody to pray for me."

The woman who had spoken that afternoon on the street in front of John Lee's came up to him. "I've been waiting for you, Son," the dear little lady said. "And so has JESUS. We can pray together."

Jimmy went back to Indiana, but there was never any more opium or dope in the hayloft. And when his daughter went down cellar to wash out her two brothers' work shirts in the laundry tubs, she never thought about a young boy who used to bend over the tubs to earn dope. Because, you see, neither she or her brothers have any idea even today that their dad was Jimmy the rat.

~ end of chapter 9 ~
